

# West San Carlos: Opportunities and Constraints

## Background

**Existing Land Use and Built Form:** West San Carlos Street is predominantly a commercial and retail corridor. Much of the development on West San Carlos Street is suburban, auto-oriented, retail establishments. While it was once a booming retail strip, since the advent of the modern shopping mall, West San Carlos, much like many suburban retail corridors, has been in a state of decline. This decline is apparent in both the appearance of some of the physical structures as well as the types of businesses located on West San Carlos Street. While the area is mainly retail, there are some major constraints, such as the size of the retail space available, and a small resident and income base from which to draw from in the immediate surrounding area. Further constraining the ability to attract a reinvigorated retail base in the area are the types of businesses that are currently located in the area. For example, there is a high concentration of lower rent mom and pop stores, used car lots, antique stores, and undesirable businesses such as medical marijuana dispensaries, adult stores, gun stores, and massage parlors.

In regards to the physical form of the street, currently West San Carlos Street and South Bascom Avenue are not pedestrian friendly. While there have been some upgrades in term of streetscape design, there is still a lack of trees to provide shade, places for pedestrians to sit, and places for pedestrians to cross mid-block. Furthermore, the retail uses in the area are generally auto-oriented, with parking in the front of the building adjacent to the sidewalk, which creates an inhospitable walking environment. Unfortunately, even if the street was designed in a more pedestrian friendly manner, there are few neighborhood serving retail outlets to which most residents could walk.

**Traffic and Transit Ridership:** West San Carlos Street was historically, and remains today, an important arterial road leading to Downtown San Jose. Despite the fact that the route is a major arterial connector between Downtown San Jose and regional attractions, such as Santana Row and Westfield Valley Fair Mall, the current traffic levels are all at or above the City's standard level of service, which means that this arterial has not exceeded its capacity. The busiest intersection on the corridor is Bascom Avenue, which is at the City's minimum allowable level of service. The intersections of West San Carlos Street and Lincoln Avenue, West San Carlos Street and Meridian Avenue, and Bascom Avenue and Parkmoor Avenue are the busiest intersections in the Urban Village, all having traffic levels at the City's acceptable level of service. All other intersection have traffic levels that are above the acceptable level of service.

Currently, West San Carlos is very well serviced by public transit with both bus and light rail options in or in close proximity to the Urban Village. There are two bus routes that operate along the West San Carlos corridor: a local bus route, Line 23, and a limited stop bus route, Line 323 which runs between De Anza College and Downtown San Jose. The Valley Transit Authority (VTA) is also planning a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) line which will run along the West San Carlos corridor eventually replace the limited stop Line 323. The BRT system is planned to be operational in 2017. There are anticipated to be two BRT stops in the Urban Village, one at the intersection of West San Carlos Street and Bascom Avenue and another at West San Carlos and

Race Streets. To further complement the transit options in the Urban Village, there is a VTA light rail stop approximately a half mile from the eastern boundary of the Urban Village.

In terms of transit ridership, Line 23 is VTA's third most productive line, with 9,800 daily riders or 10% of VTA's bus ridership. The bus stops that have the highest boarding rates for the corridor are Bascom Avenue and Race Street, which are also the same intersections that will have BRT stops. Line 323, which has only been in operation since October 2012, has an average weekday ridership of 1,863 riders.

**Parks, Community Centers and Libraries:** This area is highly under served by parks, community centers and libraries. The only park in the area is a small pocket park located at Scott Street and Menker Avenue. There are no community centers or libraries in the neighborhood. The Rose Garden Library and the Hoover Community Center are approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile away from the Urban Village, and does not directly serve the West San Carlos neighborhood. Also, there is the Bascom Community Center located approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  miles from the southern boundary of the West San Carlos Urban Village, but much like the other community facilities mentioned, it does not directly serve the neighborhood.

## Opportunities

**Historic and Cultural Resources:** West San Carlos Street has an interesting historic mid-century modern character. Most notably, the corridor is known for the Western Appliance Sign, which is said to be the South Bay's most spectacular example of neon signage (West San Carlos Street Historic Context). The corridor also contains some interesting examples of mid-century buildings, most notably the Babyland building and the Circle Shopping Center, both located at the intersection of West San Carlos Street and South Bascom Avenue.

Sections of the corridor also feature structures of importance from other eras as well. For instance, in Antique Row, districts known for its specialized retail cluster, there are buildings that date back to the 1920s (West San Carlos Street Historic Context).

While the corridor has a very interesting historic character, with many of the buildings originating in the mid-century modern era, according to the West San Carlos Street Historic Context (2011), there are few significant historic buildings in the area. Additionally, due to the mid-century modern character of the corridor, many of the structures are auto-oriented, and are thereby inconsistent with the type of development envisioned for the corridor in the City's General Plan.

The historic features present along West San Carlos Street provide a particular opportunity in the Urban Village planning process. Preservation and enhancement of these features could be used as a means to distinguish the corridor and make it unique from other areas in the City. Whether the entire buildings are preserved or just the iconic features that represent the history of the corridor, such as the Western Appliance Sign, these mid-century modern elements can be used to brand the village.

**Location:** One of the main benefits of this corridor is its location. The corridor is located just out side of Downtown San Jose, and is one of the main arterial roads that lead into Downtown. Additionally, the corridor is conveniently located close to both Interstate 280 and Highway 17. West San Carlos Street also has the advantage of being one of the main arteries connecting Downtown San Jose to Santana Row and Westfield Valley Fair Mall which are significant regional commercial and entertainment centers. West San Carlos Street turns into Steven's Creek Boulevard west of Highway 17 which is a main thoroughfare to the City of Cupertino and De Anza College, and it will also be a primary link to the planned Apple Corporate Headquarters.

**Recent Development Activity:** West San Carlos developed as a prominent retail corridor in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the uses on the street are auto-oriented and consistent with the urban sprawl associated with this time period. In the last decade, the new development along West San Carlos has shifted to become more urban as planning and development patterns have shifted away from auto-oriented uses to "smart growth" inspired mixed-use development. Many of the new developments along West San Carlos Street are mixed-use and designed to facilitate a more walkable urban environment. For example, there is a recent development on the north west corner of West San Carlos Street and Meridian Avenue, which has ground floor retail with office space above, limited setbacks from the sidewalk, and parking in the rear. There is also a new residential development located on West San Carlos Street between Meridian and Willard Avenues. This development has higher densities than those typically seen in the area, live-work space on the ground floor, and limited setbacks from the sidewalk. Both of these developments are a desired departure from the suburban, auto-oriented uses so prevalent on this Street and a shift in the urban form to a more pedestrian environment.

In addition, there are two pending mixed-use developments just outside the Urban Village boundary that will further transform the area towards a more pedestrian friendly urban form. One of the buildings, to be located at the intersection of West San Carlos Street and Meridian Avenue, is a mid-rise, five-story building with ground floor retail and 218 multi-family residential units. Upon completion, which is expected to be in the Fall of 2014, this development will fill in the remaining underdeveloped property at this intersection. Just to this east of this development, is a second pending mixed-use development. This development, which is currently still in the planning stage, is expected be the first building in a three building project. The proposed building will include a 13-story tower with a density of 116 dwelling units per acre. The building proposal also includes ground floor retail fronting on to West San Carlos Street. Both developments will be somewhat unprecedented in the area in terms of density and smart growth design.

**Planned Bus Rapid Transit:** As mentioned earlier in this memo, the VTA is planning a BRT route for West San Carlos Street. Two BRT stops will be located within the West San Carlos Urban Village. This will complement the Local 23 bus route that is currently running along the corridor. The BRT will run along the Steven's Creek and West San Carlos corridor from De Anza College to Downtown San Jose. Although the BRT is not set to open until November 2017, the VTA is currently initiating the planning process and will be coordinating their efforts with the City's Urban Village planning process.

BRT can facilitate and encourage urban oriented development, and conversely, new urban development will support BRT ridership. The BRT line will also make the area more desirable

for new development because of the enhanced transportation options. Additionally, by coordinating the Urban Village planning process and the BRT planning process, the BRT infrastructure can be seamlessly integrated into the streetscape design that is to be included in the Urban Village plan.

**South Bascom Avenue:** South Bascom Avenue, which is six lanes wide, has more capacity than is needed now and projected to need in the future. This presents an excellent opportunity to put this Street on a “road diet” and redesign the right-of-way to be more pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

## Constraints

**Property Ownership:** One of the main constraints affecting the potential redevelopment of the West San Carlos study area is the fragmented nature of many of the properties on the corridor. Often there are strip malls where various adjacent stores are owned by separate individuals. There are two sites in particular that are extreme cases of property fragmentation: The Circle Shopping Center and the shopping center located at Leigh Avenue and West San Carlos Street. Both sites are currently developed as strip malls and appear to be one property but each of the stores in the strip mall are on separately owned lots. This is a significant constraint to the redevelopment of these sites because it will require consolidation of multiple parcels of land. As part of the planning process, staff will attempt to address this issue by bringing together property owners in order to initiate dialogue between the multiple owners.

**Corridor Length:** The long length of the West San Carlos corridor makes it difficult to develop the area as a linear consistent development. Nodal development would better suit this location as there are existing areas that would be ideal for nodes of development and activity. For example, one potential node could be the intersection of West San Carlos Street and Bascom Avenue. This intersection is historically one of the main hubs of activity in the Village; the properties surrounding the intersection are larger and could allow for higher density development in a highly visible and highly accessible location.

**Lot Size:** The lot depth on the south side of West San Carlos is very shallow and abuts single-family residences, thereby limiting the size and height of development that can be built. Lots that are under 75 feet in depth are common on the south side of West San Carlos with some lots as shallow as 35 feet. Such shallow lots stand a very limited chance of being redeveloped, therefore, in order to facilitate the redevelopment of shallow properties along the south side of West San Carlos Street, the planning process should explore opportunities to expand the Urban Village boundary southward, thereby including adjacent residential properties within the portions of the corridor that is planned for redevelopment.

Lots on the North Side of West San Carlos Street and on both sides of South Bascom Avenue are deeper than those on the south side of West San Carlos Street with many of the lots measuring at least 100 feet in depth with some being larger than 200 feet deep. These lots are more conducive to redevelopment than the lots on the south side of West San Carlos but the constraint of fragmented property ownership still exists. In many cases, in order to facilitate development of

these smaller lots or lots with fragmented ownership, the planning process will need to encourage aggregation of properties. This will allow for a density that is consistent with what the General Plan has designated for the Urban Villages.

**Surrounding Single-Family Neighborhoods:** To add further constraint to the redevelopment of the shallow, fragmented, lots on the south side of the West San Carlos Street, these properties are directly adjacent to single-family detached homes on small lots. These properties could make it difficult to integrate new development along West San Carlos Street into the existing neighborhood. Although, the south side of the street will be a particularly difficult interface to design, this will be a constraint found throughout the entire Urban Village since the urban fabric of the neighborhoods surrounding the corridor is predominantly single-family detached residences. The integration of new development will require that special attention be paid to design guidelines that stipulate height limits and terraced architecture that steps back from single-family residences in order to ensure that there is a complimentary interface between the building typologies.

**County Pockets:** Within the West San Carlos study area there are pockets of unincorporated areas that are within the jurisdiction of the County of Santa Clara as opposed to the City of San Jose. Since the properties within the County pockets are not within the jurisdiction of the City of Jose they are not subject to the City's zoning ordinances. This is a major issue within the neighborhood because there are a number of adult stores and medical marijuana dispensaries located adjacent to an elementary school and other family-oriented uses.

The county pockets pose a further constraint in that the commercial property owners are reluctant to renovate or redevelop buildings on their properties because doing so would trigger annexation into the City of San Jose where zoning laws can be more stringent than those in the County.

**Parks:** One of the major constraints with respect to parks in the area is that although the City has a mechanism in which to elicit parkland or funds in lieu of parkland from developers, the City does not presently have the funds to construct, operate or service new park land facilities. Currently, the City requires that residential developers provide 3.5 acres/1,000 residents of neighborhood/community serving parkland. This is accomplished in one or more of the following ways: dedicate land, construct a "turnkey" park, construct qualifying private recreation facilities, or pay an in-lieu fee. Despite requiring developers to dedicate parklands, the City's current fiscal state does not provide funds to build or service such parks.

A further constraint in the West San Carlos Urban Village is the availability of land to use for park space. There are very few, if any, parcels that could be converted into park space in the neighborhood.

## Previous Planning Studies

In the last decade, previous planning efforts have been conducted in the West San Carlos area. These planning initiatives have informed the over all Urban Village planning process as well as this Opportunities and Constraints Memo. The first study, entitled, "West San Carlos Street Bascom Avenue Economic Development Strategy", was conducted by the San Jose

Redevelopment Agency in 2003. This document examined the West San Carlos corridor and proposed strategies for its redevelopment and revitalization. The second planning initiative, which was conducted by San Jose State University in collaboration with Greenbelt Alliance and the City of San Jose Planning Department, consisted of a community-based street audit that examined the current conditions of the streetscape of West San Carlos Street. This study resulted in 10 key recommendations for the corridor. Both of these documents are included as appendices to this memo.